

A LAMENT FOR AFGHANISTAN

Anyone who reads around the travel books of the Thirties must, in the end, conclude that Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana* is the masterpiece. Byron was a gentleman, a scholar and an aesthete, who drowned in 1941 when his ship to West Africa was torpedoed. In his short life he travelled as far as China and Tibet, and to most of the countries nearer home. In 1928 he published *The Station*, an account of a visit to the monasteries of Mount Athos, and followed it up with two pioneering volumes on Byzantine civilisation, which, at that time, received scant consideration from academic circles. He had some lively prejudices. Among the targets of his abuse were the Catholic (as opposed to the Orthodox) Church; the art of Classical Greece; the paintings of Rembrandt; Shakespeare – and when his Intourist guide protested that the plays could never have been written by a grocer from Stratford-upon-Avon, he murmured, 'They are exactly the sort of plays I would expect a grocer to write.' In 1932, attracted by the photo of a Seljuk tomb-tower on the Turkoman steppe, he set out on a quest for the origins of Islamic architecture. And, if it is fair to place his earlier books as the work of a dazzlingly gifted young amateur, it is equally fair to rank *The Road to Oxiana* as a work of genius.

I write as a partisan, not as a critic. Long ago, I raised it to the status of 'sacred text', and thus beyond criticism. My own

copy – now spineless and floodstained after four journeys to Central Asia – has been with me since the age of fifteen. Consequently, I am apt to resent suggestions that it is a 'lost book' or in need of being 'rescued from the library shelves'. By a stroke of luck, it was never lost on me.

Because I felt the death of Robert Byron so keenly, I sought out his friends and pestered them for their reminiscences. 'Very cross,' they said. 'An awful tease.' 'Surprisingly tough.' 'Abrasive.' 'Incredibly funny.' 'Fat.' 'Rather hideous . . . eyes like a fish.' 'Wonderful imitation of Queen Victoria.' By the time I was twenty-two, I had read everything I could – by and about him – and that summer set out on my own journey to Oxiana.

In 1962 – six years before the Hippies wrecked it (by driving educated Afghans into the arms of the Marxists) – you could set off to Afghanistan with the anticipations of, say, Delacroix off to Algiers. On the streets of Herat you saw men in mountainous turbans, strolling hand in hand, with roses in their mouths and rifles wrapped in flowered chintz. In Badakhshan you could picnic on Chinese carpets and listen to the bulbul. In Balkh, the Mother of Cities, I asked a fakir the way to the shrine of Hadji Piardah. 'I don't know it,' he said. 'It must have been destroyed by Genghiz.'

Even the Afghan Embassy in London introduced you to a world that was hilarious and strange. Control of the visa section rested with a tousle-haired Russian émigré giant, who had cut the lining of his jacket so that it hung, as a curtain, to hide the holes in the seat of his trousers. At opening time, he'd be stirring up clouds of dust with a broom, only to let it settle afresh on the collapsing furniture. Once, when I tipped him ten shillings, he hugged me, lifted me off the floor and belted: 'I hope you have a very ACCIDENT-FREE trip to Afghanistan!'

No. Our journeys were never quite accident-free: the time a soldier lobbed a pick-axe at the car; the time our lorry slid, with gentle resignation, over the cliff (we were just able to

jump off); the time we were whipped for straying into a military area; the dysentery; the septicaemia; the hornet stings; the fleas – but, mercifully, no hepatitis.

Sometimes, we met travellers more high-minded than ourselves who were following the tracks of Alexander or Marco Polo: for us, it was far more fun to follow Robert Byron. I still have notebooks to prove how slavishly I aped both his itinerary and – as if that were possible – his style. Take this entry of mine for 5 July 1962 and compare it with his for 21 September 1933:

In the afternoon we called on Mr Alouf the art dealer. He took us to an apartment filled with French-polished 'French' furniture, most of it riddled with worm and upside down.

He had recently converted to Catholicism and, on showing us a signed photograph of Pope Pius XII, crossed himself fervently and rattled his dentures.

From a cupboard he produced the following:

A Roman gold pectoral set with blue glass pastes. A forgery.

A neolithic marble idol with an erect phallus, on an accompanying perch. The perch was genuine, the idol not.

Thirty Syro-Phoenician funerary bone dolls.

A 'Hittite' figure, bristling with gold attributes, perhaps the one Byron saw in 1933. A fake.

Various worrying gold objects.

A collection of Early Christian glasses (genuine). 'I have many glasses', said Mr Alouf, crossing himself, 'covered with crosses. But they are in the bank.'

Finally, a marble head of Alexander the Great. 'I have refused twenty thousand dollars for this piece. TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLARS! All archaeologists agree mine is the only genuine head of Alexander: Look! The neck! The ears!' Perhaps – but the face was entirely missing.

From the Levant we would go on to Teheran. There was more money about than in Byron's day and many more Europeans after it. But the Shah was a pale copy of his father and already he, too, looked pretty silly, and the men around him queasy. One day we went to see Amir Abbas Hoveyda in his office at the Iranian Oil Company (he was not yet Prime Minister): 'A man with big eyes and despairing gestures. He seemed trapped behind the enormity of his desk. He offered us the use of his helicopter in case we should need it.'

Once Byron gets to Iran, his search for the origins of Islamic architecture really gets under way. But to construct, out of stone and brick and tile, a prose that will not only be readable but carry the reader to a pitch of excitement requires talents of the highest calibre. This is Byron's achievement. His paean of praise for the Sheikh Lutf'ullah Mosque in Isfahan must put him at least in the rank of Ruskin. One afternoon, to see how it was done, I took *The Road to Oxiana* into the mosque and sat, cross-legged, marvelling both at the tilework and Byron's description of it.

The 'experts' will carp that, while Byron may have had lyrical powers of description, he was not a scholar – and, of course, in their sense he wasn't. Yet, time and again, he scores over sound scholarship with his uncanny ability to gauge the morale of a civilisation from its architecture, and to treat ancient buildings and modern people as two facets of a continuing story.

Already in *The Byzantine Achievement*, written at twenty-five, there is a haunting passage that tells in four sentences as much about the schism of the Western and Eastern Churches as any number of portentous volumes:

The existence of St. Sophia is atmospheric; St. Peter's, over-poweringly, imminently substantial. One is a church to God; the other a salon for his agents. One is consecrated to reality, the other to illusion. St. Sophia, in fact, is large, and St. Peter's is vilely, tragically small.

On the subject of Iran, he is even more clairvoyant. On reading *The Road to Oxiana* you end up with the impression that the Iranian plateau is a 'soft centre' that panders to megalomaniac ambitions in its rulers without providing the genius to sustain them.

As is well known, the late Shah-in-Shah saw in the ruins of Persepolis a mirror image of his own glory and, for that reason, held his coronation binge about a mile from the site, in tents designed by Jansen of Paris, where a riff-raff of royalty could dine with the ghosts of his soi-disant predecessors.

Read, therefore, Byron's comments on Persepolis in the light of the pretensions and downfall of the Pahlavi Dynasty:

The stone, owing to its extreme hardness, has proved impervious to age; it remains a bright smooth grey, as slick as an aluminium saucepan. This cleanness reacts on the carving like sunlight on a fake old master; it reveals, instead of the genius one expected, a disconcerting void . . . My involuntary thought as Herzfeld showed us the new (newly excavated) staircase was: 'How much did this cost? Was it made in a factory? No, it wasn't. Then how many workmen for how many years chiselled and polished these endless figures?' Certainly, they are not mechanical figures; nor are they guilty of elaboration for their own sake; nor are they cheap in the sense of lacking technical skill. But they are what the French call *faux bons*. They have art, but not spontaneous art . . . Instead of mind or feeling, they exhale a soulless refinement, a veneer adopted by the Asiatic whose own artistic instinct has been fettered and devitalized by . . . the Mediterranean.

If you pursue this vein, you will find that, under the bravura passages, Byron is expounding a very serious thesis – and one of crucial importance for understanding our own time. All he finds most admirable in Persian art – the tower at Gumbad-i-Kabus, the Seljuk Mosque in Isfahan, the incomparable

mausoleum of the Mongol Khan Uljaitu, or the buildings of Gohar Shad – results from a fusion (one could say, a chemical explosion) between the old Iranian civilisation and the peoples of nomad stock from the Oxus Basin and beyond. You even feel that Byron's favourite character, Shir Ahmad Khan, the Afghan Ambassador to Teheran, belongs among these first-rate monuments: in other words, genius visits Iran from the north-east.

Certainly – in Byron's day and mine – to cross the Afghan frontier, after the lowering fanaticism of Meshed, was like coming up for air. 'Here at last', he wrote of Herat, 'is Asia without an inferiority complex.' And it is this moral superiority of the Afghans, together with a fear of the centrifugal forces spinning in Central Asia, that has scared the Russians and the bunch of seedy traitors who have sold their country. (May they boil in Gehenna!) So when I read that the Heratis have been sending women's dresses and cosmetics to the cowards of Kandahar, I think back to a dress I once saw flapping in the old clothes bazaar in Herat – a gown of flamingo crêpe with sequined butterflies on the hips and the label of a boutique in Beverly Hills.

Even in Kabul, the unlikely was always predictable: the sight of the King's cousin Prince Daud at a party, the old 'Mussolini' blackshirt, with his muddy smile and polished head and boots, talking to – who? – Duke Ellington, who else? The Duke in a white-and-blue spotted tie and blue-and-white spotted shirt: he was on his last big tour. And we know what happened to Daud – shot, with his family, in the palace he usurped.

I can guess what's happened to the crippled Nuristani boy, who brought us our dinner from his village up the mountain. We had camped by the river, and he came down the rock face, swinging his crutch and his withered leg and, somehow, hanging on to the dish and a lighted firebrand. He sang while we ate – but they have bombed the village and used gas on the inhabitants.

I can guess, too, what happened to Wali Jahn. He took me to safety when I got blood-poisoning. He carried me on his back through the river, and bathed my head, and made me rest under the ilexes. But when we came back, five years later, he was coughing, deep retching coughs, and had the look of someone going down to the cold.

But what have they done to Gul Amir the Tadjik? He was ugly as sin with an unending nose and silver earrings. You never saw anyone so devout. Every time he wanted a rest, 'There was no God but God . . . ' but as he bowed his face to Mecca, he would squint out sideways and, when I fell in the river trying to cast a trout fly, God was forgotten in a peal of girlish giggles.

Where now is the Hakim of Kande? We stayed in his summerhouse under a scree of shining schist and watched the creamy clouds coming over the mountain. In the evening we saw a girl in red creeping out of a maize field: 'The corn is high,' he said. 'In nine months there will be many babies.'

What's become of the trucker who admired my ear-lobes? We left him in the middle of the road. His carburettor had clogged and his hashish pipe had clogged, and the pieces were all mixed up, on the road, and we were in a hurry.

Or the houseboy at the Park Hotel in Herat? He wore a rose-pink turban and, when we asked for lunch, said:

'Yessir! Whatyoulike? Everything!'

'What you got?'

'No drink. No ice. No bread. No fruit. No meat. No rice. No fish. Eggs. One. Maybe. Tomorrow. YES!'

Or the man in Tashkurgan who took me to his garden? It was a very hot and dusty afternoon and Peter was looking for traces of the Bactrian Greeks. 'Go and find your Greeks,' I said. 'Give me your Marvell and I'll find a garden' — where I really did stumble on melons as I passed and had green thoughts in a green shade.

Or the mad woman in Ghazni at the Tomb of Mahmud? She was tall and lovely and she stared gloomily at the ground

and rattled her bracelets. When they opened the doors, she flung herself on the wooden balustrade, and flapped her crimson dress and cawed like a wounded bird. Only when they let her kiss the tomb did she fall silent. And she kissed the inscription, as if each white marble letter contained the cure for her sickness.

This is the year — of all years — to mourn the loss of Robert Byron, the arch-enemy of Appeasement, who said, 'I shall have warmonger put on my passport,' when he saw what the Nazis were up to. Were he alive today, I think he would agree that, in time (everything in Afghanistan takes time), the Afghans will do something quite dreadful to their invaders — perhaps awaken the sleeping giants of Central Asia.

But that day will not bring back the things we loved: the high, clear days and the blue icecaps on the mountains; the lines of white poplars fluttering in the wind, and the long white prayer-flags; the fields of asphodels that followed the tulips; or the fat-tailed sheep brandling the hills above Chakharan, and the ram with a tail so big they had to strap it to a cart. We shall not lie on our backs at the Red Castle and watch the vultures wheeling over the valley where they killed the grandson of Genghiz. We will not read Babur's memoirs in his garden at Istalif and see the blind man smelling his way around the rose bushes. Or sit in the Peace of Islam with the beggars of Gazar Gagh. We will not stand on the Buddha's head at Bamiyan, upright in his niche like a whale in a dry-dock. We will not sleep in the nomad tent, or scale the Minaret of Jam. And we shall lose the tastes — the hot, coarse, bitter bread; the green tea flavoured with cardamoms; the grapes we cooled in the snow-melt; and the nuts and dried mulberries we munched for altitude sickness. Nor shall we get back the smell of the beanfields, the sweet, resinous smell of deodar wood burning, or the whiff of a snow leopard at 14,000 feet.